

Art meets history at SLV Junior High

By Willie King

What's the best way to learn something? Getting involved with the project isn't a bad start.

What about learning history, though? Interaction with the subject is somewhat limited, most of the characters being dead, and all. And you can't exactly take a time-machine trip and launch a thousand ships for Helen, or hold a discussion about the meaning of life with Confucius.

In Bruce Shulman's seventh grade classes at San Lorenzo Valley Junior High this year, though, students took their own time machine with paint brushes being the method of transport.

With the help of SPECTRA artist Ralph D'Oliveira, 147 students took a trip to the Third Crusade, painting a mural on one of the outdoor walls at the school. On their trip, the students met up with King Richard the Lion Hearted and Saladin, the Muslim warrior.

On their school walls, the conflict over Christianity and Islam took shape. Instead of dry words within a textbook, history now comes to life every time they walk by the classroom.

"We're tying social studies to art," Shulman said. "With seventh grade kids, if they can dome something visually, they'll understand the period better ... It gives them a chance to enrich their social studies environment."

The first step in this journey back to the Medieval 12th Century was understanding the period. At first, the students learned about the Crusades — taking hold of the people involved, the conflicts between the cultures, and the costumes of the day.

Next they re-created scenes on paper — a King here, a martyr there, and maybe a castle or two thrown in.

"We then picked the best drawings," Shulman said.

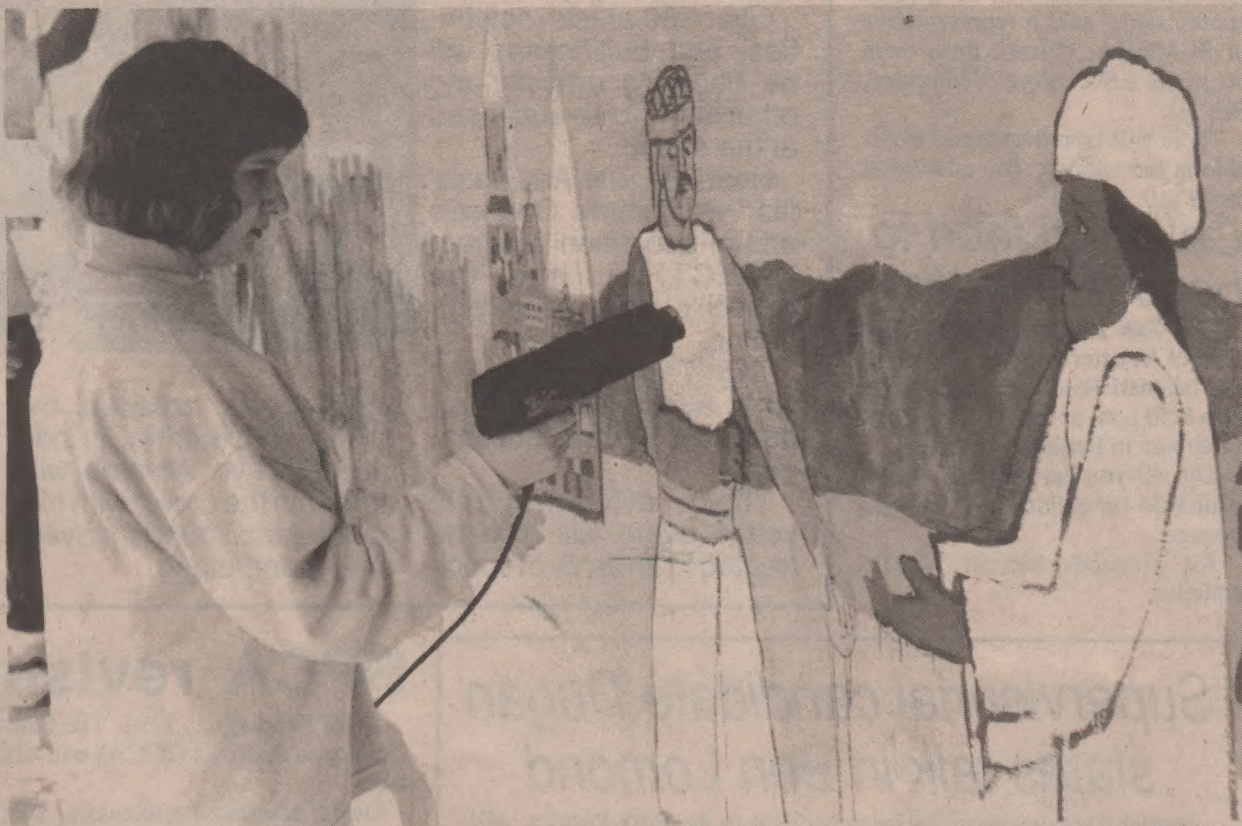
With the aid of an overhead projector, the best student renditions of the period were projected against a large piece of plastic.

Then, with the aid of a device that looks like a small pizza cutter, the outline of the drawings were scored — giving the students an outline of their project, which was soon transferred to the outside wall.

Once the outline was up, the students took shifts in painting this particular story of antiquity. Six students at a time worked the project.

"By the time we were done, every kid who wanted to paint was able to," Shulman said.

It was in the painting that the students got a lesson in art from D'Oliveira, a 20-year veteran of



Angela Arrowsmith, age 12, dries out the mural with a heat gun

teaching in county schools.

D'Oliveira demonstrated and guided the project — showing not only where to paint, but special techniques to bring the art to life. For instance, a brushing technique called "glazing" helped give an English castle a deeper, 3-D effect. Another technique employs a heat gun to dry sections of the mural and

help speed up mother nature. (These students came to learn, not just watch the paint dry.)

How did the students perform? "Fantastic," D'Oliveira said. "I think this is real fantastic. The kids have done a fantastic job. It's a great school, the kids are great."

D'Oliveira's enthusiasm was real. But it's also an interesting job for

him, too. The job just isn't in the painting, it's in the planning. "You have to coordinate between the teacher, the students and the school," he said.

The mural will decorate the school by Shulman's class for a good long while — perhaps years. It was the process, this time, that made all the difference in the learning.

"But," Shulman said, "the bottom line is it's fun."